

Remarks to the Opening Session of the European Heritage Policy Agora 2026

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Mare Nostrum: Championing Environmental Sustainability through Heritage

(Duration: 10 - 15 minutes)

Distinguished guests, esteemed colleagues, dear friends,

It is a privilege to join you today for the opening of the European Heritage Policy Agora 2026 and this year's theme: *Mare Nostrum: Championing Environmental Sustainability through Heritage*, is deeply meaningful for me.

The term *Mare Nostrum*, bears witness to the fact that the Mediterranean has long been more than a sea. It has been a bridge between civilizations, a space of exchange, and a living archive of humanity's shared story. Across its shores, cultures, faiths, languages, and traditions have interacted for millennia—sometimes in harmony, sometimes in tension, yet always shaping one another in profound ways.

French historian Fernand Braudel, whose work profoundly shaped Mediterranean studies, wrote in 1949:

“The Mediterranean is not one landscape, but countless landscapes; not one sea, but a succession of seas; not one civilization, but civilizations layered one upon another.”

This echoed the view of the North African historian and thinker Ibn Khaldun, who wrote in the *Muqaddimah*:

“The cities of the Mediterranean are bound together by trade, movement, and the exchange of knowledge, so that the condition of one affects the condition of the others.”

It is our choices, the language that we use and the narratives we adopt that define our relationships. Today, building on the scientific, medical, and architectural knowledge cultivated in the Arab and Islamic world that once helped shape the intellectual and cultural foundations of Europe itself, that I come here to affirm that our histories are not separate narratives, but deeply interconnected ones.

Today, however, our shared region faces mounting and interconnected challenges: conflict and displacement, climate change and environmental degradation, rapid urban transformation, economic uncertainty, and increasing social fragmentation. These pressures threaten not only lives and livelihoods, but also the cultural heritage that gives communities meaning, continuity, and identity.

And yet, at this critical moment, heritage offers us not only memory but possibility. Cultural heritage has an essential role to play in shaping sustainable and peaceful futures.

Experience across the shores of the Mediterranean has shown us that heritage is not peripheral to resilience and peace-building; it is foundational to both.

Indeed, cultural heritage can serve as one of the most effective tools we have for rebuilding trust, strengthening social cohesion, and fostering dialogue across divides.

In regions affected by conflict or instability, the destruction of heritage is rarely accidental. Gaza stands as a stark and painful example. Cultural sites, museums, historic neighborhoods, archives, and sacred places are often deliberately targeted because they embody identity, memory, and belonging. Erasing heritage becomes a way of erasing people.

Conversely, protecting heritage affirms dignity. It signals continuity. It reminds communities that their stories matter and that they remain connected to one another through a shared human legacy.

This is particularly relevant in the Mediterranean-East Asia region, where culture has always transcended borders. Our histories are deeply intertwined. Architectural traditions, trade routes, music, craftsmanship, cuisine, and systems of knowledge have circulated across this region for centuries. Heritage therefore provides a unique platform for cultural diplomacy, one that can help rebuild relationships even when political dialogue becomes difficult.

We will learn over the course of today of collaborative archaeological initiatives, cross-border conservation projects, youth exchange programs, and community-led restoration efforts that bring together people from different backgrounds around common goals. These efforts may seem modest in comparison to geopolitical crises, but they are profoundly important because they germinate in very real ways the seeds of trust, shared stewardship and mutual respect.

Heritage offers precisely this kind of connective framework.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that heritage itself is under unprecedented threat, not only from conflict, but increasingly from climate change and uncontrolled urbanization.

Rising sea levels threaten coastal archaeological sites across the Mediterranean. Desertification, extreme heat, flooding, and changing weather patterns are accelerating the deterioration of historic structures and cultural landscapes. Traditional ways of life, many of which evolved in balance with local ecosystems over centuries, are disappearing under the pressure of rapid modernization and environmental stress.

This is why the conversation we are having today is so urgent.

Environmental sustainability and heritage conservation cannot remain separate policy conversations. They are fundamentally interconnected.

For generations, traditional communities across the Mediterranean and East Asia developed sophisticated systems of environmental adaptation: passive cooling techniques in architecture, water harvesting systems, vernacular building materials, agricultural terraces, communal resource management practices, and patterns of urban design rooted in climatic understanding.

These are not relics of the past. They are sources of knowledge for the future.

In many ways, heritage provides a living laboratory for resilience.

As we confront climate change, we should not look only toward new technologies, important as they are, but also toward the accumulated wisdom embedded within traditional practices and cultural landscapes. Heritage can help us rethink sustainability not merely as a technical challenge, but as a cultural and social one.

Climate action will only succeed if it is rooted in people, identity, and local knowledge.

I would like to acknowledge here my friend Andrew Potts, whose passion and commitment inspired my own engagement with this issue since 2021. And for those of you who know Andrew, you will understand that I use the word “inspired” rather broadly to include endless insight, urgent late-night emails, documents delivered at impossible speed, and unwavering support through virtually every holiday imaginable. In fact, perhaps the real tribute today should go to Steve.

Since COP26 we have made significant progress to put heritage at the heart of climate action, including a dedicated target under the Global Goal on Adaptation. Although COP30 marked a historic breakthrough, with culture included in the Action Agenda and new heritage adaptation indicators adopted, culture was still absent from some overarching political texts. We need to work towards the recognition of culture and heritage as cross-cutting dimensions of all climate policy and action.

As we look towards COP31 in Antalya, we must continue to work to integrate heritage fully in climate implementation and financing. The focus this year needs to be on scaling action, embedding heritage into national climate policy, and ensuring communities on the front lines receive practical support.

Heritage must be included in National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), urban resilience strategies and climate finance mechanisms.

At this stage, it is a priority to unblock climate finance for heritage protection. Global climate finance institutions, such as the Green Climate Fund and Loss and Damage mechanisms, must support the protection of cultural heritage threatened by climate change. But beyond that, we have to channel resources to fully

recognize and scale up traditional knowledge and age-old learning as climate solutions. We hope that COP31 will further emphasize locally rooted and culturally informed resilience approaches in addition to technological solutions.

This means placing communities at the center of conservation and resilience efforts.

Local residents, craftspeople, educators, youth groups, civil society organizations, and traditional communities hold invaluable knowledge about how heritage functions within daily life. Their participation is essential not only for effective conservation, but also for ensuring that heritage remains relevant, inclusive, and sustainable.

When communities feel ownership over heritage, they become active stewards of both cultural and environmental sustainability.

This is especially important for younger generations.

Young people across our region are seeking purpose, connection, and agency in shaping the future. Heritage can provide all three. It can help foster civic participation, strengthen identity without exclusion, and encourage a sense of shared responsibility toward place and community.

But for this to happen, we must expand access to heritage as a dynamic force connected to education, innovation, climate adaptation, urban planning, and economic opportunity.

We must also invest in civil society networks and international cooperation.

No single institution or country can address these challenges alone. The threats facing heritage are transnational, and our responses must therefore be collaborative.

This is where organizations and networks such as (EN and ??) the International National Trusts Organization play such an important role. INTO demonstrates the power of connecting civil society organizations across borders to exchange expertise, share resources, and develop innovative approaches to conservation and community engagement.

Through these partnerships, we are seeing how local initiatives can be scaled into broader models of cooperation, whether through climate adaptation strategies for historic sites, training programs for heritage professionals, youth engagement initiatives, or advocacy efforts that place culture at the center of sustainable development policy.

Cross-border collaboration is especially vital in the Mediterranean context because our heritage challenges are shared. The erosion affecting one coastline today may affect another tomorrow. The displacement threatening cultural continuity in one community resonates across the entire region. And the lessons learned in one place can inspire solutions elsewhere.

In this sense, heritage becomes not only a means of preserving the past, but a mechanism for collective action.

As we move forward, we must advocate for a more integrated vision of policy - one that recognizes culture as essential to environmental sustainability, peace-building, and human development.

We need stronger frameworks that connect heritage with climate policy, urban resilience strategies, education systems, and international diplomacy. We need investment models that support both conservation and community wellbeing. And we need to elevate the voices of local communities, especially women and youth, whose contributions are too often overlooked despite their central role in safeguarding cultural continuity.

Most importantly, we must resist the temptation to see heritage only through the lens of vulnerability.

Yes, heritage is at risk. But heritage is also a source of strength.

It carries memory through periods of upheaval. It fosters belonging in times of displacement. It provides continuity amid rapid change. And it reminds us that humanity has always adapted, rebuilt, and reimagined itself through culture.

The Mediterranean has endured because its civilizations understood the value of exchange, coexistence, and interconnectedness. Today, those same principles remain essential. I hope that together we can launch a Mediterranean Heritage Hub Initiative to mobilize voices and resources for heritage across our region.

If we are to build a more sustainable and peaceful future, we must recognize that heritage is not simply about conserving monuments. It is about safeguarding the cultural ecosystems that enable societies to thrive.

It is about preserving the human capacity for dialogue, creativity, resilience, and coexistence.

And perhaps most importantly, it is about understanding that our shared heritage can still serve as common ground in an increasingly fragmented world.

Let us continue in the spirit in Andalusian literary tradition (10th–12th centuries), where the Mediterranean was often portrayed as a shared emotional and cultural space:

“The sea between the lands carries messages, merchants, and memories across its waves, until the shores resemble one another in reflection.”

Thank you.